

WILDLIFE HABITAT LAND PROJECT PROPOSAL

(vers. 4/2020)

INSTRUCTIONS

1. **Region:** 6 **Regional Supervisor:** Mark Sullivan

Name of Applicant(s): Scott Hemmer

2. **Date:** 5/21/20

3. **Project Name:** Box Elder Creek Ranch **Type of Project:** Easement

4. **Size:** 8,120 acres (7,000 acres deeded and 1120 acres School Trust)

5. **Location:**

This property is located 18 miles southeast of Chinook, MT in Blaine County
FWP Region 6

- Legal Description,

Township 30 N, Range 20 E

All or portions of sections 2,3,4,7,8,9,10,11,15,16,17,18,19,20,21,22--7000 acres

6. **Map(s):**

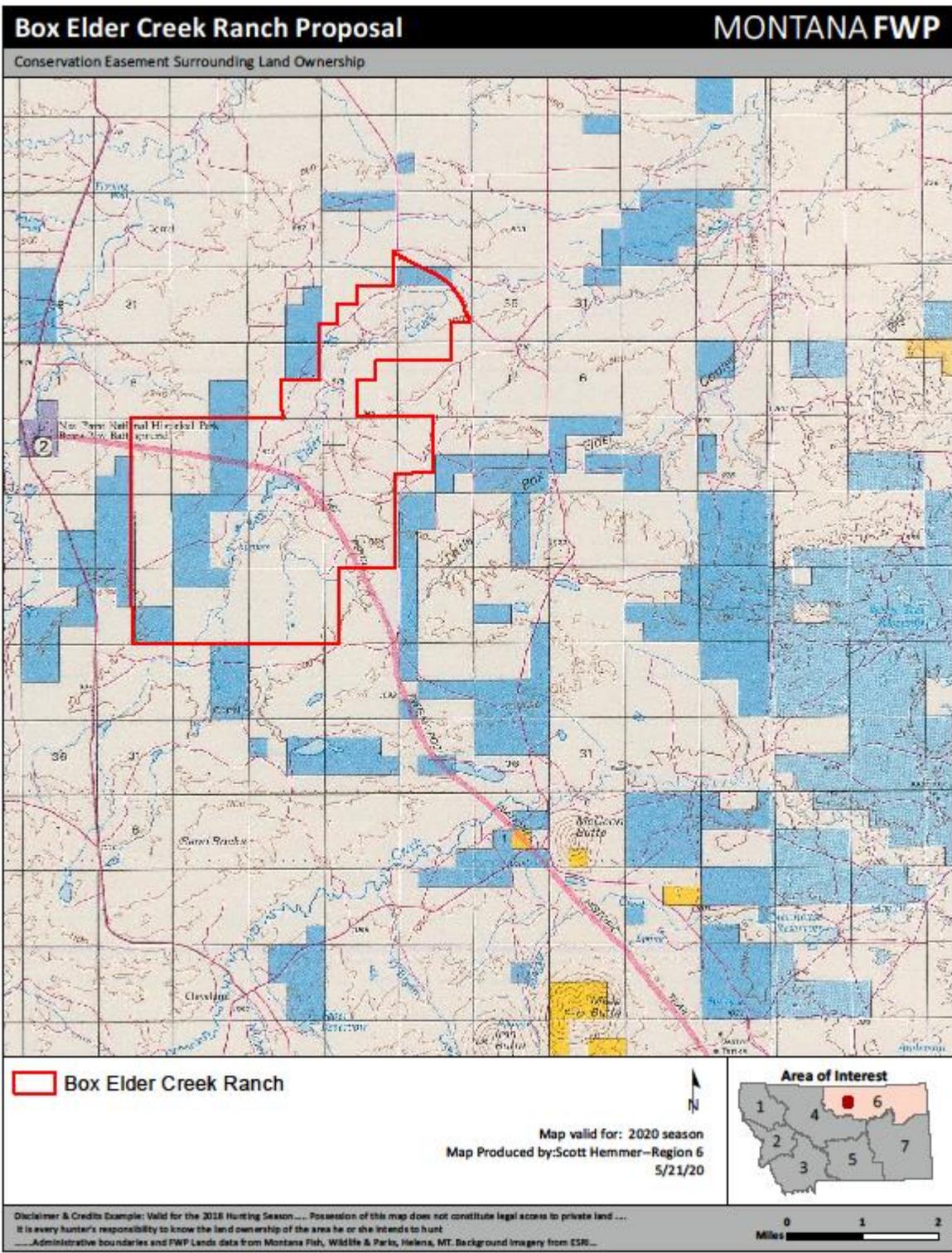


Figure 1. Box Elder Creek Ranch

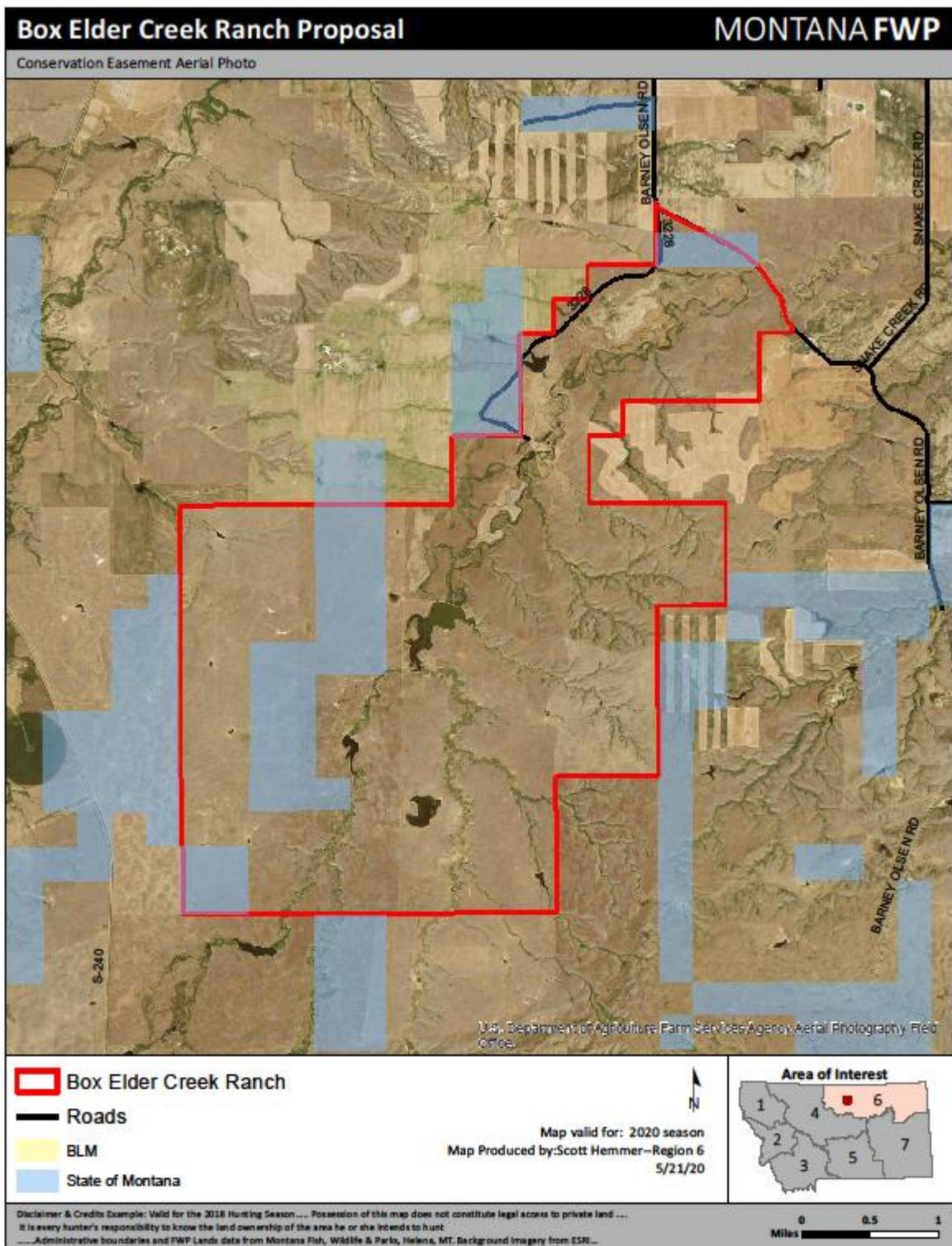


Figure 2. Box Elder Creek Ranch Aerial Photo

7. Project Need (Limit to 1,500 characters) –

The Box Elder Creek Ranch includes a total of 8,120 contiguous acres (7000 deeded and 1120 DNRC). Over 6000 deeded acres (86%) are native habitats including mixed-grass prairie, sagebrush grassland, wetlands, and riparian floodplains. Box Elder Creek bisects the property for a distance of approximately 13 miles and includes riparian vegetation made up of patches of snowberry, wild rose, chokecherry and thickets of buffaloberry and hawthorn. There are also a couple small patches of cottonwoods and willow below a reservoir along Box Elder Creek and many small cattails stands along the drainage. A large portion of the ranch is also glaciated wetland habitat. Based on the national wetland inventory, there are 160 acres of wetlands on the property, including many shallow depressional wetlands. Most of the property is predicted as having 20-40 breeding duck pairs per square mile.

A change in ownership would likely result in the loss of FWP’s ability to positively impact the habitat on this property. Management options include a rest-rotation grazing system to enhance almost 7,000 acres (deeded and leased) of native vegetation, development of a shallow marsh area approximately 40 acres in size, repair/improvement of several existing reservoirs, and the potential of conversion of existing hayland and nonnative grassland back to native vegetation.

The current landowner permits access for public hunting and is enrolled in the Block Management program. Acquisition of this property will protect this public recreational opportunity.

Region 6 proposes that FWP purchase a conservation easement on this land to protect the resource values of this property while helping maintain the existing ranching operation.

8. Statewide Habitat Criteria – up to 10 pts.

Tier I: Habitat Types to be conserved:

• Plains grasslands-Mixed-grass prairie –	3237 acres	46%
• Sagebrush Steppe-Sagebrush Dominated Shrub Grassland	2236 acres	32%
• Floodplain & Riparian –	447 acres	6%
• Wetland -	160 acres	2%

There are approximately 500 acres (7%) of cultivated land on the property currently in crop production.

Box Elder creek and its tributaries occur for approximately 13 miles on the property.

9. Project-Level Strategic Criteria (Site-Specific Habitat Values – up to 10 pts.

a) Site specific Habitat values.

- The native mixed-grass prairie and shrub grassland habitats that existed in this area between Chinook and the Bear Paw Mountains have been reduced by about 50% through conversion to small grain production and domestic hay production. This property is primarily a mix of these native habitats with additional wetland and prairie riparian floodplain habitats interspersed.
- The ranch and surrounding lands provide seasonal or year-round habitat for a variety of native species of songbirds and small mammals including several species of greatest

conservation need (SGCN) including Sprague's pipit, Chestnut-collared longspur, Long-billed curlew, Baird's sparrow and Loggerhead shrike. The ranch also provides year-round habitat and seasonal hunting opportunity for a variety of game species including pronghorn antelope, mule deer, white-tailed deer, pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse and Hungarian partridge and spring, summer and/or fall habitat for a variety of waterfowl and shorebirds.

b) Threat Status: Probable/Imminent

- The potential for this ranch to sell could be imminent. The ranch was close to selling to another landowner within the last two years. Currently, the landowners have been looking at changing management of this ranch. The owners are still considering selling the property or managing it more intensively (i.e. increasing cattle numbers, converting to small grain production, or leasing hunting access). The owners prefer to manage this ranch under current livestock numbers and preserve the native habitat while benefiting and maximizing wildlife populations while providing public hunting recreational opportunities. A conservation easement on the ranch would provide them the ability to continue with the current management practices or if sold would help ensure the wildlife resource values and hunting access currently provided by the ranch are conserved.
- If the property is sold, the potential for some of the native habitats to be converted to agricultural production or for access to be lost is probable. The most likely outcome would be that some of the property is converted to agricultural production and the hunting access could be leased. The trend in this area is toward more intensive agricultural production to maximize income and the value of the property (Figure 3). A neighboring ranch enrolled in block management was recently purchased and withdrawn from block management and portions of the ranch were converted to agricultural production. There has been increased purchasing of properties and leasing of the hunting rights in both the Milk River valley and the Bears Paw Mountains in recent years.

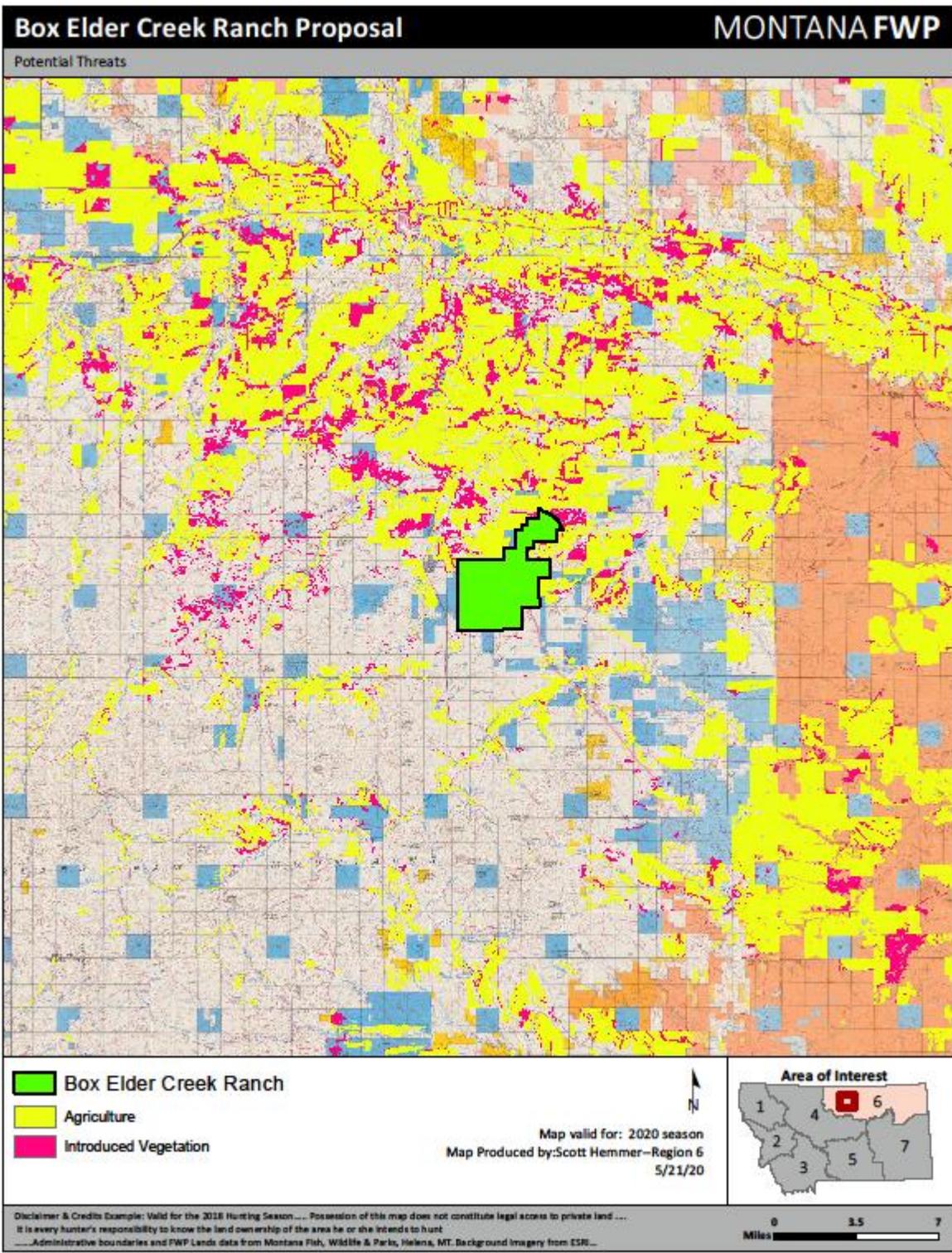


Figure 3. Boxelder Creek Ranch Potential Threats.

c) Focal Priority – up to 10 pts.

- This property is not located in a SWAP Regional focus area
- This property may have potential for a partnership with the Hi-line NAWCA. During the last Hi-Line NAWCA grant funding was offered for funding of this project and this project would likely qualify for additional partner funding in current or future NAWCA grants if project timing aligns with NAWCA grant availability.
- This property has a significant percentage of native grasslands and is located in Blaine County which is a priority county for the FWP Grassland Initiative
- The property is not in a priority area in a species conservation plan
- This property is in an area identified by Andrew Jakes antelope movement model as being important habitat for pronghorn antelope habitat connectivity and as a potential migratory corridor

Geographic Effectiveness – up to 10 pts.

- This property is relatively large in size (>8000 total deeded and leased acres)
- The property is located in one single contiguous parcel.
- There are no nearby properties that have FWP easements or are under FWP ownership. There are over 3000 acres of DNRC school trust land directly adjacent to the property and over 9,000 acres in the nearby area. The Bear Paw Battlefield-Nez Perce National Historic Park (~200 acres deeded, 592 acres perpetual easement) is located within approximately 1-mile of the property.

d) Contribute to hunting and fishing opportunity and other recreation – up to 10 pts.

- The Box Elder Creek Ranch is easily legally accessible off the Barney Olson Road south of Chinook.
- It has been enrolled in block management since 2001 and has averaged about 173 hunter days the last 4 years. It is open for hunting for all game species and the primary hunting opportunities are mule deer, antelope, upland game birds, waterfowl, and white-tailed deer.

e) Management Considerations – 10 pts.

- An easement on this property would not significantly increase FWP obligations or liabilities. The primary costs would likely be for infrastructure (fencing and water development) needs related to implementing a rest-rotation grazing system on the property.

- There would not be any expected need for additional FWP staff or equipment related to this purchase. An easement on this property would require additional staff time for the Havre area biologist and the easement stewardship manager for monitoring of the easement. It would also require additional FWP staff time from Lands and other departments during the initial development of the easement.
- The property is already enrolled in Block Management and near several other Block Management and Upland Game Bird Enhancement projects and should not require additional staffing for hunting access technicians or wardens. There may be some opportunity to cost share with the landowner through Habitat Montana, UGBHEP, or the Migratory Bird Wetland Program to improve upland habitat or improve existing wetlands.
- There are no known houses or buildings that would need to be removed
- There are no serious weed issues on the property.



Figure 4. Southeastern Wetland Box Elder Creek Ranch Aerial View



Figure 5. Southeastern Wetland Box Elder Creek Ranch Ground View



Figure 6. Box Elder Creek Ranch Central Reservoir Aerial View



Figure 7. Example of smaller wetlands located along Box Elder Creek drainage.



Figure 8. Box Elder Creek drainage wetland/riparian habitat.